Castlemaine Naturalist

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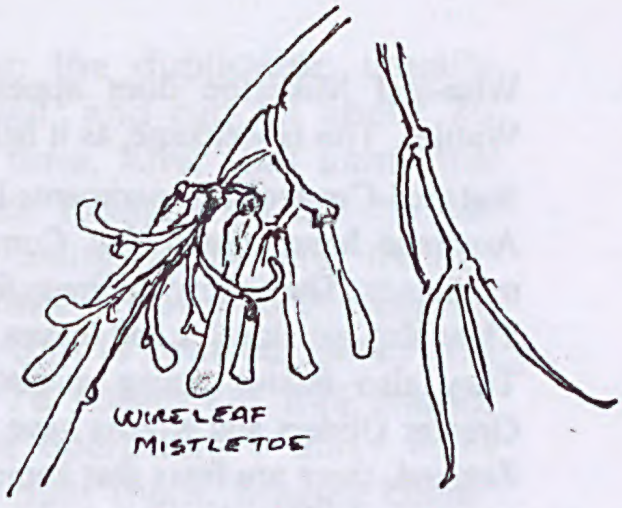

Mistletoe

There has been some controversy lately about the "mistletoe infestation" in the local area. The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria hosted a mistletoe Forum in 1996. Some of the material below has been obtained from papers presented at the forum.

Local Mistletoes. The main mistletoes in the Castlemaine district are Box Mistletoe (which is by far the most abundant, and grows on box, stringybark, ironbark and Yellow Gum), Drooping Mistletoe (mostly on eucalypts to the south of Castlemaine), Creeping Mistletoe (usually on Red Gums) and Wire-leaf Mistletoe (usually on Cootamundra Wattle).

Tree size and mistletoe. Research in the ACT shows that mistletoe mostly grows on large, mature trees, and that the density of mistletoes (number of trees per square metre) is positively correlated to the height of the host trees. The mistletoes are also larger on larger trees. Mistletoes on small trees (under 3 metres) are unlikely to survive until the tree reaches maturity. The study also showed that many of the trees with live mistletoes also carried dead mistletoes, and there were dead mistletoes on the forest floor. This suggests that some trees have mechanisms to control mistletoes. There is also evidence that the life-span of mistletoes is less than that of the host.

Tree death and mistletoe. A study in Yarra Valley Parklands showed that 228 (16.9%) of the trees showed some degree of tree decline. Of these 228 trees under stress, only 4 trees had mistletoes. Other studies have shown that trees with mistletoe grow more slowly.

Another study in the Melbourne area recorded 15 eucalypts which were heavily infested with mistletoe. Of the 15, 13 were assessed as being healthy or slightly dying back. Two were dead. Examination of the two dead trees showed substantial earth-works nearby.

In the local Castlemaine area some eucalypts have carried heavy (50 or more mistletoes) populations for many years, and have survived through both the 1982 and recent droughts. Many trees in our district show stress. Often such stressed trees are mistletoe free.

Wire-leaf Mistletoe does appear to hasten the death of Cootamundra Wattles. This is welcome, as it helps keep a non-local species in check.

Natural Controls. Experiments In Queensland, Central Australia and South Australia have shown that Common Brushtail Possums are predators of mistletoes. They show fondness for mistletoe berries at all stages of ripeness. They also eat flowers and leaves, even when other food is readily available. They also favour young mistletoe shoots. Common Ringtail Possums, Greater Gliders and Koalas have also been shown to eat mistletoes. In New Zealand, there are fears that some mistletoes may become extinct because of predation by introduced possums. Koalas at Healesville have been observed eating mistletoe and killing the plants. There is evidence of increased feeding on mistletoes in time of drought, possibly because the leaves are succulent. Other studies have shown that in some areas predation by possums is minor.

High intensity fires also kills mistletoes, but not usually the host tree. Mistletoe spread has been linked to the reduction in fire frequency and intensity. It has been supposed that the increase in mistletoe density occurs most often in isolated trees or along roadsides, both places where predation and hot wildfire have been reduced.

There are many other predators of mistletoes, including fungi and insects Little is known about the extent of these in controlling mistletoes.

Cause or effect? Over the years, there have been many examples of plans to kill off mistletoes. I find it curious that many of those proposing to attack mistletoes do not seem to worry about the degradation of our bushland by a multitude of processes. It seems to me that mistletoe spread is a symptom, not a cause, and that if we can manage to fix up the health of our landscape, that will also fix up the health of the trees. I also wonder if "ecological thinning" will also promote the spread of mistletoe.

Mistletoes are an interesting group of plants and play a key role in providing food and shelter for a diverse range of organisms. "Thus rather than considering mistletoes as noxious, introduced pests, we should treat them as the beautiful, interesting and ecologically essential species that they are."

References:

Quote from D. M. Watson *in Wingspan*, Vol. 11 no 3, Sept. 2001.
The Victorian Naturalist Vol. 114 (3) 1997 has papers presented at the Mistletoe forum.

Ern Perkins.

Editorial

I am not standing for the position of Newsletter Editor this year, though I have always enjoyed it. I started out over 20 years ago when I had to cut masters on the duplicating machine

at the High School, and then ink up the duplicator, usually getting myself covered with ink as well, and run off about 75 copies, doing one foolscap side at a time. After that came the stapling and folding. What a difference today. I do the master on the computer, correcting as I go, using the booklet master on Lotus Wordpro, do my drawings, take it down to the Legion Officeworks where Debbie makes sure that is centred, clean and set up properly before photocopying 78 copies (at this stage), stapling and folding them all in one operation! I don't even have to put them into envelopes and post them. Maggie Oliver has taken over that job.

A few times I have had a hard time trying to think up something to put into the newsletter, but mostly people have sent in articles and reports, and I hope you will give Geraldine your full support. It's important to remember - *If you are interested, someone else is also sure to share your interest.* Never feel that you couldn't possibly be able to contribute. Even the smallest of observations can help add interest, and the more variety the more people who will find something to interest them.

Members' interests vary from birds, to plants, to Geology, to Astronomy, to insects and animals, and from the very technical and scientific, from conservation issues to the aethsetic, etc., etc., so there is plenty of potential subject matter!

A big thank you to all who have supported me over the years, whether sending in articles, standing in while I was away, or doing the posting, and a very big thank you to Geraldine Harris who has agreed to take over the position, having been my very able assistant for the past 12 months.

Rita Mills (ex-to-be Ed.)

Bees and Nest Boxes.

When our attention was attracted to intense insect activity at the Sugar Glider nest box fixed some 5 metres up a Grey Box in our garden we quickly realised that we had a feral bee problem. We were very concerned for our Sugar Gliders because we know that a bee swarm invading a nest hole will kill the inhabitants. Our Sugar Gliders have access to at least four boxes between ourselves and a neighbour, so we hoped they were not in residence when the bees arrived.

I could not find an apiarist in the area who could come to remove them, and, on advice, attempted to scare them off by smearing the entrance with turps and insecticide, but had little success. It was difficult doing this with a

rag on a long pole. The bees began to create a swarm on the outside of the box and I didn't want them shifting to another.

We contacted a pest company who arrived promptly and suitably attired killed the swarm and fumigated the box. Two days later, with no further bee activity, I took the box down, and, to our relief found that the nest had been empty. Our Sugar Gliders were okay.

I scrubbed the box clean, and on a tip from John who made the boxes, screwed a very small piece of wardrobe pest strip to the lid (the ceiling) of the box to discourage scout bees from bringing a new swarm. "When Cape Weed flowers the bees swarm".

The clean box is back up the tree and in a few weeks I will check to see if our Sugar Gliders have brought in new nest material.

This experience emphasised for us the damage that can be done by feral bees.

By the way, a pair of Eastern Rosellas using a nest box a short distance away also had been investigating the bee activity, and were behaving in an alarmed manner.

Jan and Neil Maling

Farewell for Darren Bos

On February 11 Darren Bos is leaving the position of Environmental Projects Officer with the Shire of Mount Alexander to take up a position with the Port Philip CMA in Melbourne. All environmental organisations and Landcare groups in the shire have agreed to give Darren a joint farewell function on

Tuesday February 17 from 5 - 6.60 pm in the Ray Bradfield Rooms.

Members of the Field Naturalists Club are invited to attend along with members of the many other community groups who are sponsoring the program.
Light refreshments will be served.
For further information phone Hans van Gemert on 5472 1082.

BOCA Bird Challenge 6/12/03

Many thanks to the 13 volunteers who participated in the count for 2003. I think an enjoyable time was had by all and the weather was very kind to us. A perfect day for birding - clear skies, light breeze, but it became quite hot by mid afternoon.

The numbers allowed us to do two all-day and two half day trips.

Debbie Worland, Margaret Badminton and I did the Castlemaine Golf Course early with some good birds resulting.

The Southern team led by Ern and Lesley Perkins had on board Debbie Worland and Nigel Harland, The Northwestern team led by Rita Mills had Bill and Robyn Van Smeerdijk and Hideoshi (Mikey) Kudo as observers,

while Maureen and I teamed with Nola Kane and Tom Smith for our semi-local run.

All up we recorded 109 species and 2,367 birds, which was somewhat down on previous years.

All the water storages visited were very low, which would account for a large proportion of the overall numbers being down, as water birds and waders make up many of these numbers.

This year there were no egrets, spoonbills, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos, Mistletoebirds, kites or large raptors recorded.

Of the declining species we recorded 2 Speckled Warblers (Maureen was so excited that she called them Speckled Wobblers - no wonder I've got grey hair!), 2 Golden Whistlers and 12 White-browed Babblers, but we did not record any of the following - Diamond Firetail, Peaceful Dove, Jacky Winter, Hooded or Scarlet Robin or White-winged Triller.

Some other species that barely troubled the score were cormorants, ibis, Crested Pigeon (3), lorikeets (4) cuckoos (2), Brown Treecreepers (7), Yellow Robins (6), Red-browed Finches (6) and Silvereye (2). Where are they all ?! Speaking of "Where are they?", Musk Lorikeets are being seen flying over town regularly and in quite good numbers, but only 4 birds were recorded on the day.

Most honeyeater numbers were also very low.

Thanks again to all who participated. I am sure that BOCA appreciates the big efforts involved and that the information that we provide will be put to good use.

Some recent stats. -

Year	Species seen	Total bird numbers
2000	103	1580
2001	125	3491
2002	124	3558
2003	109	2367

By the way! The unbelievable happened again! - everyone was back on time at 5 pm. Congratulations.

Maureen and Ken Dredge.

Dawn Breakfast, 9/1/04

On Saturday January 9 at 6 am 12 early risers met at the Expedition Pass Reservoir just as the mist was rising off the water, with a backdrop of red streaky clouds above the hills.

After consuming a variety of different breakfast fare while listening to and identifying many birds by their calls, we strolled long the track above the water. It was a perfect sunny morning with a light breeze - ideal for birdwatching.

Thirty four species were seen in total. The highlight occurred as we were about to leave; first a Leaden Flycatcher appeared, giving everyone a good look at it; then Rita spotted a fledgling Pallid Cuckoo, and Geraldine, observing it saw it being fed by a small bird. Unfortunately she couldn't identify the species.

What a wonderful way to start the New Year!

Margaret Badminton.

Castlemaine Golf Course Birds, Dec/Jan

Sugar Gums have been in flower, and the Red Gums have had the best flowering for many years.

The Latham's Snipe are back, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes have young, as have Little Lorikeets and Olive-backed Orioles, while the Common Bronzewings are nesting.

Other birds seen are Grey Butcherbird, Musk Lorikeets, Crested Shrike-tits, Black-chinned Honeyeaters, Little Eagle, Dusky Woodswallows, Rufous Whistler and Rufous Songlarks. The White-browed Babblers are still around, but their numbers are decreasing.

Debbie Worland

Observations

• Ern Perkins reported that he has been hearing a Mopoke calling at or near 27 Doveton Street regularly. He's also seen some black and tan birds that he refuses to acknowledge in the garden.!

• Maggie Oliver has also been hearing Mopokes calling from somewhere down near the creek in Gaulton Street. George Broadway reported one is still in the Botanical Gardens.

• Both Chris Morris and George Broadway have had Common Bronzewings at or near their homes, feeding on Wattle seeds.

• Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos are still visiting Richard Piesses' place near Vaughan every 2 or 3 days, and a Brown Falcon is being seen there regularly. While staying in Melbourne recently he went for a walk in the evening down near the Yarra Bend Golf Club and saw hundreds of Fruit Bats taking flight. It was suggested they might be some of those which have been relocated from the Botanical Gardens, but Richard believes that there have been established colonies all along the river for some time..

• Hans van Gemert reports a population explosion of Fuscous Honeyeaters at his place. Five of these very territorial birds were even seen chasing a Red Wattlebird.

• While sitting on the edge of the boardwalk at Ben Lomond in Tasmania, Ern Perkins had the odd experience of having a Wombat calmly walk under his legs as he sat there.

• A Blackbird was sighted recently diving under a Melaleuca which reaches the ground, followed by several Magpies which surrounded the bush and appeared to be waiting in ambush for it to reappear . George Broadway

• Doug Mills had been seeing a Goshawk near the lane up to Willmer's in Blakeley Road over about a week, but on 26/1 it was found dead under the power lines. It was a juvenile, and perhaps had crashed into the lines.

• An Australian Hobby was perched in the trees at 118 Blakeley Road on 25/1. Rita Mills

• One warm evening in December Geraldine Harris was watching Fairy Martins making repeated explosive insect catching flights interspersed with retreats to the branches of a dead tree, seeming to catch their breath ready for the next concerted effort, at their Barkers Creek property.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING 29/1/04

• A letter was received from the **Friends of Kalimna, thanking the Club** for its help with a survey which has resulted in the area surveyed being fenced.

• A letter was received from McClures Earthmoving which has the contract for the **sewer line from Newstead**, to inspect the line to be done along the roadsides to ensure that the contractors will be aware of any concerns re. significant areas. It was suggested that we request a map showing where the line is to go for a start. Quite a lot of the line is through private property.

• The **sales of the CD "Is it a Native?"** has been a huge success, with some 600+ sales, and good reviews in the Land For Wildlife newsletter and News and Views magazine.

• It was decided to purchase a book to be donated to the Maldon Athenaeum Library as a **Memorial** to member, **Neil Amor**, who died recently.

☞The next **Campout of the South Eastern Australian Naturalists' Network** is to be held on the long weekend in March (5 - 8) **at Kangaroobie,** Princetown, near Port Campbell, on the old ocean road. Timboon FNC is the host club. It offers bunk style accommodation.. Fees are - $55 per day for full accommodation, $15 dinner only any evening if staying off site. No breakfasts or lunches available for those staying off site. Full payment due by Feb. 25 Enquiries to Helen Langley - ph. 5595 4200.

There are **full details and a booking sheet available at the meeting**, or contact the Secretary, George Broadway.

• A **roadside cleanup** is to be held on **Sat 14 starting at 8.30am.** Meet at Taits' Carriages, Pyrenees Highway. Wear sturdy footwear, hat etc., bring a drink. Gloves, safety jacket and rubbish bags are provided, but grocery bags come in very handy.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club,
PO Box 324,
Castlemaine.
Incorporation #A000301B

Launch of Indigenous Plants of Bendigo.

Members of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club are invited to the launch of *Indigenous Plants of Bendigo* by the Mayor, Cr. Rod Fyffe. The book has been produced by the City of Greater Bendigo and the Bendigo Native Plant Group, and will be launched at the Senior Citizens Rooms, Old High Street, Golden Square on Wednesday 25 February at 10.00 am.

RSVP to Ann Mooney by Friday 20 February.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme - February 2004.

General meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions are usually on the Saturday following the general meeting, and leave promptly at the times stated from The Octopus, opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. Feb. 13 *AGM* Election of Office bearers and Committee. Followed by *The Fight to Save the Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat*. Speaker, Jason Edwards, Ecologist and Wildlife photographer. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. Feb., 14 *Roadside Cleanup 8.30 am.* Meet outside Taits' Carriages. Details p7, meeting notes.

Sat. Feb. 14 *Malmsbury Botanical Gardens and Malmsbury Reservoir*. Leader H. van Gemert.. Leave the Octopus at **3.30 pm** sharp. **Bring a picnic tea.** *Note later starting time.*

Fri. Mar. 12 *Bolivia and Peru* with Geoff Harris. UCA hall, 8pm

Sat Mar. 13 *Ellis Falls* on the Coliban River at Taradale. Leader C. Morris. Leave the Octopus at 1.30pm sharp. Wear Sturdy footwear. Take afternoon tea.

Fri. April 2 *(note change of date due to Good Friday falling on the second Friday) Western Australia*, Speaker, Ern Perkins. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat. April 3 *Mistletoe tour* Leader E. Perkins. Leave the Octopus at 1.30pm sharp.

2003 Committee - C. Morris (President) ph. 9885 4221, J. Turnbull (VP and Grievance Officer) ph. 5474 3035, G. Broadway (Secretary) ph. 5472 2513, H. van Gemert (Treasurer) ph. 5472 1082, E. Perkins, R Mills (Newsletter Ed & Public Officer), G. Harris (Ass't Newsletter Editor), B. Maund, M. Oliver, R. Piesse and J. Cole.

Recommended Subscriptions for 2004 (to stay the same as 2003)
Ordinary membership: Single $22, Family $30
Pensioner or student: Single $19, Family $24
The subscription includes postage of the *Castlemaine Naturalist.*